

Cool by tjmystic

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Summary:

Jonathan was never going to be cool, and he knew it. How could he not know, when he was constantly compared to Steve Harrington?

Cool

Author's Note:

Because I'm still terribly disappointed that we didn't get the Steve/Jonathan friendship I was hoping for.

Also, Steve deserves all of the love, and it's great that he bonded with the kids, but, from Jonathan's perspective, he's still one of the privileged few who get to be popular. Anyone who's ever been on the nerdy side of the spectrum knows that secret, malicious joy of seeing someone on those top rungs of the ladder fall a peg or two.

Jonathan knew where he fell on the popularity totem pole. From the first day of Kindergarten, when he'd shown up with a five-times-too-big corduroy jacket and a plastic toy camera instead of an action figure, he'd been slotted somewhere between "kids who eat glue" and "future serial killers".

Most of the time, he didn't care. Well, *pretended* he didn't care, if not for his own sake then for Will's. His little brother, his favorite person in the world, was quickly en route to being just as uncool as Jonathan. Between the AV club, Dungeons and Dragons, and that time Lonnie got drunk at the bar and complained that his youngest was a "fucking fag", he didn't have much of a chance. The horrors of the Upside-Down cemented the status. (When he found out, two years later, that people were calling him "zombie boy", it took all of his willpower to refrain from busting down the middle school doors and cracking all of their skulls.) Will needed someone to tell him, "It's cool to be uncool." He needed the person that Jonathan never had.

Of course, Will had at least three other people for that. That was one area where Will was definitely better off - at least he had friends. Jonathan had... well, he had his mom. And as much as he loved her, and as much as he tried to rebel against everything pop culture told him, he was still a sixteen-year-old boy, and no sixteen-year-old boy

wants to be best friends with his mom.

He had Nancy. Kind of. She talked to him in the hallways between class and when he came to pick up Mike from her parents'. But that was it. After they'd stood back-to-back in his charred, Christmas-lit living room, he'd expected... well, he wasn't sure what he expected, but it was definitely more than cordial conversation. He expected that she might ask him to get a burger, or maybe go the park. It wasn't like he expected to suddenly become her boyfriend.

That was what Steve was for.

And that was really the breaking point. After that night, he and Steve tried hanging out. They really did. Now that he wasn't hanging with Tommy and Carol, he actually seemed... nice? Maybe nice was too much. Polite. Respectful? Those worked. And, pleasant of a change as that was, it wasn't enough to make them friends. If not for Nancy, they would have stopped trying after the first attempt. Instead, they managed to make it through four or five thoroughly awkward conversations in Steve's car before the whole thing fizzled out. They had three things in common, and just three - shitty dads, love for Nancy, and a shared experience with a monster.

Steve had a brand new car. Steve was easy to talk to. Steve could play basketball, and football, and baseball. Steve was cool. Steve - as much as Jonathan hated to admit it - *looked* cool.

Jonathan had a brand new camera, a beat-up junkyard reject of an automobile, and the personality of a fruit fly.

Jonathan was never going to be cool, and he knew it. How could he not know, when he was constantly compared to Steve Harrington?

January 5, 1985

Snow dotted the windshield as Jonathan turned into the cul-de-sac, heat cranked up as high as it would go and wipers ticking furiously before his face. By tomorrow night, he knew that the roads would be covered. At least this year the middle school gymnasium was adequately stocked with salt.

His car gave a faint screech as he pressed on the break and put it into park. It took two tries to turn the ignition, but, finally, it sputtered out.

Beside him, the passenger seatbelt clicked and a hand reached out to thread through his hair. A second later, Nancy leaned over to kiss him. His eyelids fluttered shut even as one of his hands framed her cheek. They'd done more than kiss - so much more than kiss - but that brief touch of her lips on his was still the most magical sensation he'd ever felt.

With a *pop!*, she separated and sat back against the door. If she looked down at his jeans or smiled a little more smugly than before, he pretended not to notice.

"Are you staying for a while, or just getting Will?"

Her tongue drew across her teeth at the last syllable, and damn her for making his thirteen-year-old brother's name into something sexy.

"I, uh..." He coughed, ignoring - again - that satisfied gleam in her eye. "Just getting Will. But, uh, I can come back... tomorrow?"

Nancy bit her lip - how did she know to do those things with her mouth? - and nodded. "I'd like that."

"Great." Jonathan smiled - little more than a quirk of his cheek, but it was all he could manage when she was looking at him like *that* - and nodded back. "Oh, the door."

"Jonathan, I can get my own door."

"I know," he answered, already jumping out of the car and racing to her side. She actually let him slide it open for her, and, this time, he gave her a real, face-cracking smile. "I just wanted to."

Nancy rolled her eyes, but he didn't miss the way her mouth ticked up before she forced it into a scowl. "I guess I appreciate it. I guess."

Jonathan tried not to laugh, especially when she wound both her arms around his and tugged him to the door. He'd never played Clark Gable in any of his fantasies before dating Nancy became a reality - he hated *Gone With the Wind*, with a motherfucking passion - but that didn't stop him from loving the chance to be romantic for her.

Before they could take more than a step onto the front porch, the light flickered on, and the door swung open.

"You're two are back early!" Mrs. Wheeler swung her weight onto one hip, smiling at Jonathan before turning back to Nancy. "I thought you two were going to that new restaurant in Valparaiso for your date?"

That smile twitched at his lips again. It was still so strange to hear the word "date" applied to him and Nancy.

"We decided to just get stuff at the diner and go to the movies," Nancy muttered, flushing bright red. "It's not a big deal, mom."

Mrs. Wheeler opened her mouth, obviously wanting to say something else about that, but bit down on her lip at the last second. Jonathan's shoulders instantly relaxed - Mrs. Wheeler was handling her daughter's breakup and new boyfriend remarkably well, based on what he knew about her, and he didn't want Nancy to press her luck (or his) by fighting with her about the details.

"Well, as long as you had fun," she finally huffed. "Come on in, it's freezing. Jonathan, would you like some hot chocolate? I just made some for the boys."

Jonathan stamped his feet outside the door to knock off the snow but shook his head. "No thank you, Mrs. Wheeler. We, uh... I'm just here to get Will."

Her oven-mitted hand pressed up against his cheek, patting it as he and Nancy squeezed past her. "You're such a good brother."

A nervous chuckle lodged itself in his throat before he could stop it - if she knew just how much he'd failed Will in the last two years alone, he doubted she'd still feel that way.

"Honey, is that Jonathan?"

Even with one hand still on Jonathan's cheek and the other closing the door, Mrs. Wheeler managed a full-body eyeroll. He tried not to notice how much she looked like his girlfriend in that moment.

"Yes, dear, he's here to pick up Will."

Jonathan wandered into the living room, not bothering to take off his scarf before giving Mr. Wheeler an awkward little half-wave.

"Hi, sir."

Mr. Wheeler *hmped* in acknowledgement, but didn't move from his chair or lower his newspaper. He wasn't glaring, though, so he figured that had to count for something.

"Hi yourself," he droned. "Haven't seen you in awhile. Nancy tells us you're a celebrity now."

This time, Jonathan flushed.

"I - I don't know about that," he stammered. "It was just a few photos -"

"Just a few photos? From what she tells us, you're going to be in an art gallery."

From the other side of her father's chair, Nancy's eyes slid into something both solemn and proud.

"Yeah, all the way in Peoria. It's gonna be featured in the *Chicago Sun* and everything."

Jonathan's hand found his way to the back of his neck under the scarf. Okay, so, yeah, it was a big deal. The problem was that the pictures being featured weren't pictures that he'd ever wanted shared, except maybe in a government report. After all, that was why he'd

taken them once Hopper confirmed that it was safe to get into the lab. Officially, he was there to save Bob's body, or what was left of it - he refused to let his mom deal with that, and Hopper and El were both exhausted. Once he got in, though, he couldn't stop himself from snapping his camera. It felt... wrong, to let everything that had happened be forgotten. Will deserved better than that. Barb deserved better than that.

Bob deserved better than that.

Unbeknownst to him, Nancy had apparently felt the same way. He didn't find out until two weeks later that she'd mailed the negatives to Murray. He couldn't use the photos for the paper - nothing that would implicate Jonathan or Nancy as the whistleblowers for Hawkins Lab, nothing that would reveal the whole truth - but that didn't stop Murray from sending a few copies to his contacts in the art world. He apparently bet on the fact that no one would think the monsters or carnage were real, and that they would somehow connect it to that *Nightmare on Elm Street* movie that came out after Halloween. Of course, Murray won that bet pretty solidly.

Mrs. Wheeler dropped her oven mitts off in the kitchen then turned to finish scrubbing at the dishes.

"Well, we're very proud of you, Jonathan," she said. "And I'm sure Joyce is, too."

His mother cried when she saw the announcement in the paper. He didn't feel like mentioning that, though.

"Well, uh... well... thanks." He cleared his throat, purposely looking away from Nancy. "But I should probably..."

He trailed off, gesturing vaguely toward the basement. Thankfully, Mrs. Wheeler seemed to understand.

"Yeah, they're all still in the basement. I'll make Will a mug of cocoa to go."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler."

She smiled at him as if no one ever thanked her for anything, then

went to the steaming pot on the stove. Mr. Wheeler was buried in his newspaper again. Behind him, Nancy rolled her eyes, then stepped up to give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," she whispered into his ear.

Jonathan's whole body shivered. He felt like he was being way too obvious, watching her all the way up the stairs until she disappeared, but he couldn't help it. Sometimes, he thought he'd spent most of his life staring at Nancy. He was never going to get over the fact that he was finally allowed - encouraged - to do so.

As soon as he heard her door snap shut, he shook himself out of it and headed downstairs.

The noise engulfed him as soon as he shut the basement door. Another smile, completely different from the ones he'd given Nancy, stretched across his mouth. He should've known they'd still be at it with D&D - it all Will could talk about for the last week.

He rounded the bannister, fully expecting to see four excited preteens. He was surprised to find that he was off by two. Max, at least, was a given. Since the last disaster, she'd been practically glued to the hip with Lucas, a fact that he knew the other boys - even Mike - gave him hell over. Honestly, he should've expected to see her.

But never, not in a million years, would he have expected to see the second guest.

On the far side of the table, Mike pounded a tall, robed figurine onto the board. "Steve, your action!"

Steve grabbed the sides of his head with both hands.

"Shit, what do I do, what do I do?!"

"Shoot at the phylactery!" Dustin shouted, jumping up and down in his seat. "If you hit it, he dies!"

To his left, Lucas screeched. "No, shoot at his chest! It'll knock him back and the rest of us can finish him!"

"Or he could finish the son of a bitch himself and *shoot the phylactery!*"

"How the hell is he gonna hit the phylactery from thirty yards away?! Aim for the chest!"

Steve twitched between them, eyes wide with panic. In front of him, Mike hammered the little figurine again, causing all five of his players to jump. From a distance, it looked like Steve was sweating.

If it had been any of the kids, Jonathan would've stayed put and let them finish. But this... He had to put a stop to this. This was just too weird.

Deliberately, Jonathan rapped his knuckles against the banister. All six of them jolted, turning toward the stairs with a mixture of terror and annoyance. When they saw it was just him, they visibly relaxed. All except Steve. Steve, at least, had the grace to turn the same color as Max's hair.

"Hey, Jonathan!" the boys echoed.

"Hey, guys. You're gonna have to cut the game short."

The whole table - red-faced Steve included, he noticed with a jolt - groaned in response.

"Just one more hour?" Will begged. "We just got to the dungeon."

Six pairs of eyes bored into him. Jonathan focused on his brother to avoid the pair perched beneath Ray Ban sunglasses.

"I'm sorry, buddy," he apologized. "It's almost nine, and I promised mom I'd have you home before she got off."

"Come on!" Dustin shouted. "We can just finish this one part! You don't have to stay, Steve can drive him home!"

Steve - *Steve Harrington* - nodded fervently. "Yeah, definitely."

A muscle near Jonathan's temple twitched. He'd never been there - was the only one who hadn't, now he thought about - but he had a

feeling that this was what the Upside Down felt like.

"That's... nice. But, like I said... mom." He cleared his throat. "He can always come back tomorrow?"

"But I'm about to fucking *destroy* the Lich King with my... my..."

Jonathan raised his eyebrow. Steve coughed, then ran his hand through his hair.

"You know what, not important."

Nonchalant (and faking it - Jonathan was well-acquainted with the look of forced aloofness), Steve dropped the dice on the table and reached for his coat.

"Come on, you little dickheads, I guess your parents want you home, too."

"Did you bring your car?" Jonathan asked before he could stop himself. Part of him wanted to pretend that it was just because he was worried about the kids, but, in reality, he was trying to remember if he'd seen the car in the driveway and purposely blocked it.

Thankfully, Steve still wouldn't meet his eyes. "Yeah, it's next door. Will said you were... uh..."

Steve didn't have to finish - Will must've said that he was on a date with Nancy, and Steve, wanting to avoid any further attempts at conversation from either of them, must have decided to park at Lucas's. Jonathan didn't know if he was relieved about that or annoyed. Or just weirded out.

Max kicked Steve in the ankle, causing him to let out a shrill, girlish "oof".

"Come on, Tom Cruise, if you're taking me home early, I want food," she grumbled. "God knows Billy won't have anything."

"Billy's home?"

Steve did a much better job of faking it this time - he lifted his eyebrow and everything - but Jonathan still saw right through it. Behind his back, he pinched the skin at his wrist - nope, he was 100% awake.

"Yeah, but he'll be in his room. Loser." She snorted. "Besides, I keep some syringes in my backpack just in case. They're empty, but he doesn't know that."

Steve kicked her ankle, but that didn't hide the relief that washed over his face.

"Fine," he grouched, "but you're paying me back as soon as you get a job, muppet. This is the third time this week."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Max nudged Lucas and Dustin up the stairs in front of her. "Bye Jonathan!"

"Bye Jonathan!" the boys echoed.

Steve started to wave, then aborted the motion and stuffed his hand into his jacket instead. He brushed the other against Dustin's hair and pushed him up the stairs around Max. The door seemed to echo behind them.

It took Will pulling on his sleeve to make Jonathan realize he'd been staring at the door.

"So... did you have fun on your date?"

"Ach, I don't want to hear about it!" Mike screeched. He bounded up the stairs around them, his hands pressed to his ears. Jonathan didn't miss that he let one set of fingers go to give Will an awkward, sideways hug before he disappeared. He also didn't miss how his little brother smiled and rolled his eyes when Mike mumbled, "I need to call El anyway."

Will waited until the door was securely closed behind his best friend before asking again, "Seriously, though. How was it?"

Jonathan ruffled his little brother's hair and led them toward the backdoor - he'd really rather not have to deal with Mr. and Mrs.

Wheeler again.

"It was... nice," he finally allowed. "How about the game?"

He didn't ask about Steve, but he didn't have to. Sometimes, Will's people sense amazed him. God knew he didn't get it from Jonathan or Joyce. Or Lonnie.

"It was... weird. Like, fun weird, but weird. Steve was actually really good." Will shuffled into the snow, holding the wall to keep from sliding. "I think Dustin, Lucas, and Max are his best friends."

Jonathan wasn't as lucky at keeping his balance. "Really?"

Will nodded. "Yeah. It's kind of funny, though. Dustin and I get to argue about who has the better big brother now."

At that, Jonathan actually snorted. "Yeah, well, as long as you always win."

"Always," Will laughed.

Jonathan opened the passenger door and let Will hop in. As soon as he closed it, a faint knocking echoed behind him. A quick glance at the upstairs window showed Nancy in her floral-print nightgown. She winked at him, waved, then threw the curtains shut. The light behind her silhouetted her body as she stripped off the gown and went to bed. Jonathan's mouth dried right up.

Next door, Steve's brand new car pealed out of Lucas's driveway.

Shaking his head, he wandered around to the driver's side door. The car wasn't worth a shit, but the heater worked, and it got him where he needed to be. He was still routinely mocked at school. No girl but Nancy ever looked at him twice.

Right now, none of that seemed to matter. Jonathan was never going to be cool.

But he was definitely, *definitely* cooler than Steve Harrington.